

# Singapore has to keep on working to improve its multiracial society

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong says all races must do so, with trust and compromise

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Singapore's multiracial society is a work in progress, and all races have to make efforts to accommodate and engage one another in a spirit of trust and compromise.

Making this point in an impassioned speech on the state of race relations yesterday, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong added that the Government will continue to engage Singaporeans and update its policies on race and racial harmony.

"No community has gotten everything it wanted, but collectively, we have achieved more together than what we would have otherwise by just focusing on our individual agendas," he said at a forum on race organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

In his speech, he set out Singapore's philosophy of multiracialism and gave suggestions to improve its system, noting a delicate balance has been struck through mutual compromise thus far.

He noted recent worrying incidents that have caused Singaporeans to consider the state of its racial harmony. The cases, which were highlighted on social media, have raised awareness of racism and opened up conversations about how Singaporeans can hold themselves to higher standards on this issue.

Outlining three ways that Singapore can keep working at multiracialism, Mr Wong stressed the role that the majority community has to play by being sensitive to the needs of minorities, as it is harder to be a

minority in any multiracial society.

This applies to all aspects of daily life, he added, highlighting those who face discrimination when looking for a job, potential tenants who learn that landlords do not prefer their race, and those who have to deal with stereotypes about their race or insensitive comments. "These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes."

But he also called on Singaporeans to continue engaging the issue in the spirit of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise. This means having civilised discussions, listening to one another and understanding all points of view, he said.

He urged groups to take care not to jostle aggressively to assert their identity and rights over others, as doing so could lead to a pushback.

"It will not take long before other groups feel put upon and start to jostle back," he warned, pointing to trends in other countries, where one side uses identity politics to push its cause, which invariably emboldens another to up the ante and make greater demands.

"We end up fuelling our worst tendencies – our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness," he said.

"If we go down this path, insisting on differences over commonality, minority groups will not win, and the outcome will be most unhappy for the majority community too," he added at the forum, which was live-streamed from the University Cultural Centre Theatre at the National University of Singapore in Kent Ridge.

He said that being Singaporean did not mean being only English-educated and cosmopolitan, as there remains an entire generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Mandarin than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world.

"They feel that they have already given up much to bring about a multiracial society: Chinese-language schools, Nanyang University, dialects and so on. 'What do you mean by 'Chinese privilege'?' they will ask, for they do not feel privileged at all," said Mr Wong, referring to the much-cited notion based on the idea of "white privilege" in the US.

The Government, he continued, will engage widely and update its policies to help strengthen racial harmony, citing the ongoing review on whether Muslim nurses should be allowed to wear the tudung with their uniform as well as the constant updates to work pass policies in response to concerns over immigration.

Mr Wong said some citizens feel the Government should work on the basis that Singapore is a race-blind society, and remove all rules and practices that underline race in various ways. While he shared these aspirations, he said Singapore has not reached a "post-racial" stage, and has to keep working deliberately to improve race relations.

He added: "We must have the humility to acknowledge our multiracialism is still a work in progress, the honesty to recognise that not everyone will want to move at the same pace, and yet persevere to protect our multiracialism – cherish it, nurture it, strengthen it."

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